

DISCRIMINATION IN THE COLLEGES DIES HARD

Progress Report on an American Sore Spot

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MOST American Jews continue to react to discrimination in the universities with a sense of outraged hurt and despair—a reaction that some observers find excessive. Objectively, the American Jewish community is, as of 1950, more prosperous and more secure than in decades past. Yet the very thought of the quota system in the colleges seems to shake the community to its very roots. It is as if this situation symbolized a kind of rejection at the hands of America.

Need one really wonder at this—when one considers what higher education means to all Americans, and perhaps especially to American Jews? The early Jewish immigrants used to refer to America as the “golden land.” The core of hope in this phrase still survived even after the phrase itself had taken on an irony bred by the poverty and struggle of the slum. There was always the prospect that “the children” would be able to “get ahead” by “getting an education.” Between the slum and the golden vista there stretched the educational ladder.

THE system of “quotas” maintained in the vast majority of our colleges and professional schools, flying in the face of the basic American principle of equal opportunity, is perhaps among the most frustrating of the various forms of discrimination practiced in this country. EDWARD N. SAVETH here marshals the facts in the case and tries to appraise the validity of arguments made on behalf of current admission practices. Mr. Saveth, an expert in “minority” problems in the field of education, is on the staff of the American Jewish Committee, and teaches a course in American historical writing at the New School. He is the author of a book, *American Historians and European Immigrants*, and has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY—most recently with the article “Good Stocks and Lesser Breeds” in the May 1949 number. Mr. Saveth was born in 1915 and earned his doctorate at Columbia University.

Nor was the value placed on higher education by Jews a unique instance; it reflected, perhaps a little more intensely, the conviction of all Americans. The common faith was—and year by year increasingly is—that education would permit the promise of America to be realized. Was not America different from Europe precisely because the climb up the educational ladder was a free and open contest, in which all advantages of birth and social position were shed, and only the individual's worth and talent counted? And if this were not the case, would not the American dream end as a variant of the ugly European pattern, with its many different ladders, most of which raised one only a few inches from the ground while an exclusive few stretched to the very top?

It has been heartening to see, too, how America has moved steadily forward to make good on this promise. To all the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and by tradition, a new human right has been added, at least in theory—the right to higher education. The only prerequisite: to want it and to be qualified for it. The burgeoning of the state and city colleges, the multiplication of scholarships, and finally the report of the President's Commission on Higher Education in 1948, all point in this direction.

Nor has the confidence placed in American education—especially higher education—proved misplaced: many have gone from the very bottom to the very top. As a result, we are socially a democratic society, more so than England, for example, where for all its economic leveling a venerable system of selective higher education tends to freeze opportunity. On the other hand, the American hope is still far from fulfilled: some who might have gone to the top were rudely prevented—for reasons that have little to do with ability but much to do with prejudice.

Educational opportunity has been good, it seems on the way to becoming better—but some ugly blemishes remain.

How shall we not show concern over the question of discrimination in the universities, in view of how central and crucial higher education is in the American scheme of things? All the more reason, however, for our concern to be sober and informed, especially since the question is a complicated one. Simple black and simple white turn out upon closer study to be merely the end points of a spectrum full of subtle shadings, and what at first glance seems a stark struggle between right and wrong often turns out to be a conflict between different "rights."

To what extent does racial discrimination in American higher education affect Jews? What can be done about it?

THERE are three outstanding facts as regards discrimination in American higher education:

(1) There is discrimination against American Negroes,* Jews, Italians, Catholics, and others, because of their "race," religion, or national origin.

(2) This discrimination does *not* prevent members of these groups, with the exception of the Negroes, from acquiring some form of higher education.

(3) The problem of discrimination in medical schools is especially acute and especially complex.

The fact of frequent discrimination few even bother to deny. The New York State Temporary Commission on the Need for a State University obtained confidential reports from 206 universities; twenty-five *admitted* to discriminatory practices. Occasionally, a university official will be outspoken, as when President Ernest Hopkins of Dartmouth acknowledged the existence of a quota for Jewish students, or when former Dean William S. Ladd of Cornell Univer-

sity medical school writes: "We limit the number of Jews admitted to each class to roughly the proportion of Jews in the population in this state." The few cases of such frankness having led to public outcry, most universities prefer to keep silent.

However, a recent Public Affairs Pamphlet summarizes the situation quite convincingly.* In the particular group of high school seniors studied—and it was large and representative—56 per cent of the applications by Jewish students (of course, most students file more than one application) to various colleges were accepted, as against 67 per cent of the Catholic applications and 77 per cent of the Protestant. These figures need qualification, for "most Jewish applicants (80 per cent) come from the Northeast and that section . . . has a much lower acceptance rate than the country as a whole." Why the Northeast does so badly in the first place is unexplained; perhaps a traditional anti-urban, anti-Eastern sentiment plays a role at least as important as a desire for geographical representation. Be that as it may, when the Northeast sample is examined separately, "the chances of an application being accepted are: 54 per cent for Jewish, 59 per cent for Catholic, and 61 per cent for Protestant." These percentages in themselves are far from sensational. What is important is that the percentage differentials are remarkably stable whichever way the data are re-assembled, and seem attributable only to discrimination.

"On the other hand," Ivy and Ross point out, "while the Jewish student encounters discrimination, that bias does not prevent him from attending college." For though applications by Jewish students have a smaller chance for acceptance, the Jewish student files applications to more colleges. The overall results are rather surprising: "88 per cent of all Protestant, 87 per cent of all Jewish, but only 81 per cent of all Catholic *applicants* were accepted" by some college.

*Educational discrimination against the Negro is so appalling in its extent, and its ramifications are so complex, that it would require separate lengthy consideration. The situation of the Italian Catholic is similar to that of the Jew, though perhaps less extreme.

**Religion and Race: Barriers to College?* by A. C. Ivy and Irwin Ross. Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 153. Much of the statistical information in the pamphlet is derived from a study conducted by the Elmo Roper organization for the American Council on Education.

It would seem that discrimination exists, but that it is no very great hindrance to a Jewish student's entering college, though it may definitely hinder him from entering the particular college he had in mind. "The Jewish applicant is much less likely than his non-Jewish colleague to gain admittance to the college of his first or second or even third choice."

But even this generalization is qualified by geographical and other considerations: "A Jewish student has as good a chance as a Christian of comparable academic standing in gaining admittance to a college in his home city." He is at a disadvantage when he applies to colleges outside his home city or state. On the other hand, smaller colleges discriminate more against Jewish students with superior records than do larger ones, and the undergraduate schools, at least, of such large universities as Chicago and Pennsylvania do not discriminate at all.

WHAT does this add up to? Is it—as some might suggest—nothing more than a generally nasty inconvenience with occasional examples of real individual hardship? For the Jewish candidate for college entrance, does the struggle against discrimination boil down largely to the struggle to be admitted in relatively large numbers to Dartmouth and other private Eastern colleges of similar standing? (That Podunk Junior College does not admit many Jews is not likely to cause much heartache.)

There may be some Jews who will pronounce themselves unconcerned as to whether the sons of their "wealthier brethren" will be able, while obtaining a college education, to rub elbows with the offspring of the "first families" of America; they suspect the motives of those who are anxious to see their children registered at an Ivy League college; they sense snobbishness, "assimilationism," or worse. Their point of view is understandable but nonetheless narrow-minded. For the struggle to be a Jew and not thereby to suffer discrimination at the hands of the admissions board of a "name" college is no mere dog-fight for special privilege from

which the main body of the Jewish community can afford to stand aloof.

It might be further said, in attempting to dismiss the matter peremptorily: these universities, in contrast to state and city institutions of higher education, are private, and are therefore entitled to pursue private aims and goals, and to set up whatever standards of admission suit their private fancies. But one notes that no university argues its case in these terms; however much it may—and legitimately so—seek to keep its machinery of control in its own hands, it defines its purposes and programs in terms of the public interest and the needs of our democratic society.

And these definitions are not merely prompted by public relations considerations or as *quid pro quo* for tax exemptions: the briefest discussion with university officials reveals that they must be taken as genuinely representing the private universities' own version of their role and responsibilities. Though privately owned and administered, they present themselves as in the forefront of American institutions concerned with the public weal. It is therefore not irrelevant to indicate to them the serious public implications of some of their private practices.

The basic fact is that the American college, public and private, is as much a social and economic institution as it is an educational one. One of the prime functions of the American college—and they openly and gladly have assumed it—is to serve as an avenue of mobility in our open industrial society. It aims to train for leadership in a democracy.

It does not—as was the tradition in English universities—aim to train members of a certain class for leadership, but to seek leaders wherever they may present themselves in our national population. Our state universities, with their open doors, are the embodiment of this democratic ideal. It is strange—even dangerous—that those private, "name" universities that especially pride themselves on the leaders they train, seem often to act more in accord with the now defunct ideal of a hereditary elite than with

the prevailing American ideal they orally profess. These private colleges do indeed train leaders: the dominant groups in America today—its social, economic, and cultural hierarchy—are in large part made up of their graduates. But insofar as these universities practice discrimination, they are implicated in a conspiracy against the very values they protest they serve so well. They would form and preserve leadership for a democracy on a caste basis.

Educational discrimination is no isolated aberration. It is but one face of that social discrimination whose goal is the fencing off of self-selecting and self-perpetuating "elites." As Carey McWilliams pointed out in his article in the November 1947 COMMENTARY, social discrimination does really matter, for social discrimination aims to cancel out the democratic factor and populate the top rungs of the social ladder with the "select." The fight against educational discrimination in the "name" colleges may directly involve only a relatively small number of Jewish families; but in its success or failure are involved the very principles of a democratic society. If discrimination should survive, it means that Jews—and other groups, too—will have been semi-officially defined as second-class citizens who must learn to "know their place." And if Jews should cease to be discontented at their exclusion from the "name" colleges, it will be testimony that they have indeed learned "their place."

All those who accept seriously the promise of American democracy—that it is a democracy of talent rather than an aristocracy of birth or earlier wealth—have reason to be alarmed at this prospect.

DR. ERNEST M. HOPKINS, retiring president of Dartmouth, has said: "Dartmouth is a Christian college founded for the Christianization of its students." In point of fact, Dr. Hopkins is undeniably correct in stating that Dartmouth was founded for this purpose. But that was a long time ago. If Dartmouth is a "Christian college" today, it still is very different from the "Christian college" it originally was. It is certainly no

longer Christian in the religious sense of that term—its curriculum is as heavily indebted to Western secular wisdom as it is to the specifically Christian (or more accurately: Judeo-Christian) heritage. Actually, what Dr. Hopkins seems to mean is that Dartmouth exists to turn out what is best described by the phrase "Christian gentlemen"—and by this is meant nothing theological, but rather "gentlemen" with the tastes, habits, and manners of the British upper classes of the 18th and 19th centuries. The word "Christian" here designates social ideal, not religious doctrine.

The question arises: how compatible is the secular American democracy that has evolved over the last one hundred and fifty years with its great institutions of learning, most of which were founded by religious denominations and in terms of a hierarchical English social structure? The founding fathers did *not*, after all, establish a "Christian gentlemen's democracy"—they established a secular democracy for all Americans.

With regard to authentically denominational schools, there is no quarrel: no Jew has the inalienable right to study at Union Theological Seminary or Fordham (though some do), just as no Catholic can demand to be enrolled at the Jewish Theological Seminary. But there are a host of non-denominational colleges, among them some of the country's finest, which while almost entirely secularized are not totally so, and whose traditions are still dedicated to the task of producing the modern equivalent of the kind of Protestant gentlemen who could be favorably compared to the cream of the English squirearchy.

These colleges have maintained their ideals for a longer time than the United States has been in existence. They are proud—and with good reason—of their history and of their accomplishments, and have no desire to become mere additional colleges in the vicinity of a large city. Colleges, after all, are more than aggregates of stone and greensward; each has a unique spirit whose surrender would be a loss. The "name" colleges have fostered ethical and cultural ideals that

have played a significant role in the development of American democracy.

Spokesmen for these colleges point out that the most vigorous opponents of educational quotas are equally earnest in their insistence that the United States is a cultural as well as a political democracy, hospitable to diverse cultural traditions. "Cultural pluralism," according to one recent definition, stresses the desirability "of preserving cultural traits, of dignifying practices different from our own, and of creating a feeling of pride in the folkways, mores, customs, and social patterns characteristic of the constituent ethnic groups in the American population." Granting the desirability of cultural pluralism, is there any justification, ask these same spokesmen, for "the public" stepping in and dictating the admissions policy of colleges founded by particular ethnic-religious groups, supported in large measure by members of these groups, and with curricula emphasizing the groups' traditions? Is the nurturing of distinctiveness as a strand in American cultural life only for the Jews, the Slovaks, the Irish—and not for the Anglo-Saxon whose ancestors went to Dartmouth?

This argument is obviously no simple rationalization for prejudice but reflects an honest concern for certain values. What we have here, to some extent, is the conflict between two rights: between the right to distinctiveness within a pluralistic society and the right of equal opportunity, both of which are held intrinsic to American democracy.* But the moral dilemma is rendered less acute (though the emotional poignancy is not) when one remembers that cultural pluralism in a democracy can only be a pluralism of equals, of groups of freely associated, equal individuals—an association

*Some universities plead the desirability of a "heterogenous" student body in defending the restriction of admissions, especially through regional quotas. Unfortunately, this defense cannot be accepted at its face value until every suggestion of prejudice has been effaced. The question of a "balanced" student body is an important one, worthy of being discussed on its own merits. But first the colleges must offer some earnest of their good faith by abandoning "quotas" that seem motivated by bias rather than a philosophy of education.

based on the will and desire to share common ideals and values. Democracy can hardly mean that, though everyone may go to college, only members of certain groups, by virtue of culturally irrelevant considerations of "race" and national origin, may go to the most distinguished colleges. Privilege is not one variety of cultural pluralism. It is closer to being its antithesis.

Many sacrifices have been made in the name of democracy. Many others surely will be called for. But considering how far along the democratic road the great Eastern private colleges have already gone, there is no cogent reason for believing that the sacrifice of certain residual, if hallowed, practices will mean the sacrifice of these institutions as we now know them. Their identities and their unique worth can certainly survive the letting down of caste barriers—Chicago, for one, has suffered no loss in accepting all qualified applicants. A good university should not find it beyond its powers to produce good Catholic and Jewish as well as Protestant graduates, expressive of its proudest ideals of culture and leadership. If the traditions of a university are viable for a democratic society, it will survive the presence of a hitherto unaccustomed number of Jews or Italians from New York. By what principle can any great American university refuse this challenge?

IF DISCRIMINATION in the colleges is an ugly inconvenience for Jews, discrimination in admission to medical schools is a constantly burning wound. There is probably no Jew in this country who has not seen some friend or relative—qualified, talented, eager to be a physician—frustrated and embittered by a stream of rejection slips from medical schools. Hundreds, and possibly thousands, of Jewish young people who would have made their mark in the medical profession have been forced to seek out other vocations. Here there is no question of special traditions, but rather the systematic exclusion of certain individuals from a profession they are eager to enter and for which they have shown remarkable aptitude. Frank Kingdon's report in 1945 (*American Mer-*

cury, October) that, on the average, three out of every four non-Jewish applicants were accepted for admission to medical school, as against only one out of every thirteen Jews, gives the Jewish community every right to be indignant.

Yet here, too, statistics waver and the problem becomes more complex when one looks at it closely; discrimination turns out to be only one factor in a complex web that threatens to paralyze medical education in this country. This, at least, is the impression received from reading a report prepared by Dr. David Berkowitz for New York State's Temporary Commission on the Need for a State University. "Thousands of earnest students," the report asserts, "will not be accepted by any medical school regardless of their qualifications," not because of discrimination but because of the very limited capacity of the medical colleges. "Although the population of the United States has increased almost 75 per cent since 1905, the medical schools of this country were graduating about the same number of doctors in 1946 as in 1905. The pressure of applicants on the country's seventy-seven accredited medical schools is tremendous. There were in September 1947 the unbelievable number of 73,281 applications on file for 6,233 places in the first-year classes of these institutions." An additional complication is represented by the fact that at least 16 of 71 reporting medical schools limit admissions to residents of their own state, which they have elected as their area of medical responsibility. Moreover, many of the remaining forty-three schools, which in theory are open to all comers, have a limit on non-residents that actually reduces their number to a nominal figure.

Applicants from New York City, therefore, regardless of their background, encounter geographic barriers to medical education. It has been said that such barriers are imposed for the sake of keeping out Jewish applicants from New York City; it is obviously no easy matter to make this charge stick, though it has a *prima facie* probability. It can be argued that imposition of geographic quotas is a means of insuring

that certain states have enough doctors for their needs, or, alternatively, of maintaining the national and non-sectional character of certain institutions. Whatever the motive of these arguments, the arguments themselves are not without point.

It should also be observed that the New York City medical colleges give preference to candidates from the metropolitan area. In the fall of 1946, the admissions of these colleges were: 51 per cent from New York City, 15 per cent from upstate, and 34 per cent from outside the state. Of the students enrolled in the five New York City medical schools in the fall of 1946, 30 per cent were Jews. The national figure on Jewish enrolments at that time in all the medical schools of the country was 12.3 per cent.

IT is obvious that, in comparison with other ethnic groups, a relatively larger percentage of Jews desire to become doctors. It should also be obvious that they have every right to be doctors, and that, in the light of the present shortage, it would be of general benefit could they satisfy their ambition. In the face of those who prefer to ignore the general welfare in deference to racial or religious bias, an uncompromising battle against discrimination is necessary.

But discrimination is, as we have seen, only part of the problem. So long as the demand for medical education exceeds the supply, rejections will be experienced by both the qualified and unqualified. On January 9, the American Conference of Academic Deans made an unprecedented attack on the medical profession for what Dean Simeon E. Leland of Northwestern University called its "Petrillo and Fishbein economics." He implied that the number of medical students is deliberately limited in order to maintain the high price of medical services. The special committee named by the academic deans to study admissions to medical school reported that the strict rationing of careers in medicine—with its ruthless elimination of three-fourths of the applicants, no matter how qualified—was in flagrant disregard of the country's needs. Med-

ical education has lagged far behind higher education in general, the report asserted. In 1905 there was one medical student to every six college students; in 1950, the ratio is one to 150. Last fall some 25,000 tried to enter medical school; only 6,387 were accepted. The situation in the dental and veterinary schools is substantially the same.

It is clear that the medical profession today needs to be hauled out of its hidebound shell and made to see that there are simply not enough doctors, not enough facilities for training them, and that if it does not act on its own initiative, government inevitably will.

IT IS not easy, however, to define the desirable limits of intervention of the state and federal governments, should the colleges and medical schools persist in refusing to clean their own house. It may yet happen that the federal government will act in largest part indirectly through grants and subsidies—and the power that goes along with them to influence standards of educational practice. Should some form of national health insurance come into being, the increasing demand for doctors would serve further to breach the dikes of discrimination in the medical schools.

Legislation, too, can play a significant role in the struggle. A federal fair employment law and a Supreme Court decision prohibiting segregation in public education, would be a most significant means of ensuring equality of educational opportunity, especially for Negroes. In New York State, the Fair Educational Practices Law of 1948 has attacked the practice of discrimination frontally. This law made it an unfair educational practice for a post-secondary school "to exclude or limit or otherwise discriminate against any person or persons seeking admission as students . . . because of race, religion, creed, color, or national origin." The only schools excepted by the law are denominational institutions, which may select students as they choose so long as they do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

This law went into effect in September 1948, and it is as yet too early to measure its full effectiveness. Some difficulties are al-

ready apparent. For one thing, individuals have been reluctant to come forward with complaints, fearing to be forever branded as troublemakers. Second, while schools may not discriminate against applicants because of race, religion, or nationality, they may give preference to the descendants, friends, and relatives of alumni, and they may establish geographical quotas; these practices provide an easy legal means of evading the intent of the law. Third, discrimination against either an individual or a group has been found to be extremely difficult to prove except in flagrant cases.

In the long run, nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the New York State law will blunt the cutting edge of educational discrimination. Already, as a result of efforts by the present administrator, virtually every non-denominational college and university in New York State has eliminated questions dealing with race, color, or religion from its application blanks. Several colleges have admitted Negro students for the first time, and reports from the City Colleges indicate that the chances of graduates getting into medical schools seem brighter. Both New Jersey and Massachusetts have followed in New York's footsteps in fair educational practices legislation.

While recognizing the role legislation can play as part of an over-all solution to the problem of discrimination in education, we should be mindful of the fact that this is a strong medicine, not to be casually prescribed. There is something about an institution of higher learning that abhors the gross and indiscriminate legislative hand—regardless of whether the legislative interest is in admissions policies or the political opinions of faculty members. Both the colleges and the minorities have much to lose, and the body of our democratic liberties is by no means fortified, if the admissions controversy can be solved only by the passing and enforcement of a law. Is it too much to hope that the American colleges, their consciences perhaps a bit spurred by the precedent of anti-discrimination legislation, might themselves awaken to a consciousness of their democratic responsibility?